



TEXAS GENERAL LAND OFFICE JERRY PATTERSON, COMMISSIONER

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PRESS RELEASE

Oil spill response crews in Matagorda ahead of potential impact

Equipment and manpower prepositioned to protect sensitive bay system

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AUSTIN, Texas — Manpower and equipment are already in place to protect Matagorda Bay from any oil spilled by a barge at Texas City, Texas Land Commissioner Jerry Patterson said Wednesday.

As a sheen of oil drifted south along the Texas coast Wednesday, protective boom and other types of equipment were prepositioned according to plan to keep any oil out of Matagorda Bay. Crews were put on alert in the event of any tarball sightings along the gulf-facing beaches of Matagorda Island. The response to the Texas City barge spill is being coordinated by the U.S. Coast Guard, the Texas General Land Office Oil Spill Prevention and Response Division, and the owner of the barge, Kirby Inland Marine.

"We are prepared to protect Matagorda Bay, and remove any tarballs off of Matagorda Island beaches should they come ashore," Patterson said. "This is where all our advance plans, our drills and our preparations really pay off."

While no tarballs have been seen on Matagorda Island yet, equipment and manpower is staged and ready for deployment including 140 workers, 60,000 feet of hard boom and 40,000 feet of sorbent boom. The tremendous effort, Patterson said, should limit the impact of the spill to tarballs washing up on some Brazoria and Matagorda Island beaches.

"Tarballs are really pretty manageable," Patterson said. "If we see them start to wash up, we'll send the crews out with rakes and shovels to pick them up."

Tarballs are formed when oil drifts at sea, and the sun evaporates the lighter components of the oil and the waves emulsify it. What's left is what Gulf Coast residents call a tarball. Tarballs are not uncommon on the Texas coast. They sometimes form naturally from oil seeps deep in the gulf. But thanks to the efforts of the Oil Spill Prevention and Response Division of the General Land Office, beachgoers see far fewer tarballs today than in the past.

"Prevention is the key to that success," Patterson said.

If you see tarballs on the beach, call the Texas General Land Office oil spill reporting toll-free number 1-800-832-8224. Volunteers are not needed at this time for any cleanup efforts on the Texas coast.

Tarball tidbits:

While some tarballs may be as large as pancakes, most are coin-sized.

Tarballs can travel hundreds of miles. Weathering processes eventually create a tarball that is hard and crusty on the outside and soft and gooey on the inside.

For most people, occasional brief contact with a small amount of oil will do no harm.

If contact occurs, wash the area with soap and water, baby oil or a widely used, safe cleaning compound such as the cleaning paste sold at auto parts stores.

Don't use gas! Avoid using solvents, kerosene, diesel fuel or similar products on the skin. These products, when applied to skin, present a greater health hazard than the smeared tarball.

The GLO responded to 53 reports of tarballs on Texas beaches over the past five years.

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